

# Homer from the dump to the digital

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The study of Homer in schools has preserved his epics through the ages. Peter Parsons reveals how we have come to have the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, and how the papyri show that ancient Greek students found him nearly as difficult as we do.

## The history of Homer

Homer has experienced his own odyssey: the long journey from the first written copies of about 600 B.C. to the printed texts that we read today. In fact, printing has formed the shortest leg of his safari. By the time his 'first edition' came off the press, in Florence in 1488, the text had already 2000 adventurous years behind it – years in which its survival depended entirely on hand-written copies which depended in turn on generation after generation of professional scribes providing for generation after generation of interested readers. No readers, no books: even now his further survival depends on us.

We possess no texts of Homer dating from the Classical Age. Papyrus, the normal writing-material of the Greeks up to the fourth or fifth century A.D., rots easily in a damp climate; and so virtually nothing survives in the excavated houses and tombs of Greece and her colonies. There is only one, later, exception. Greek immigrants settled in Egypt after its conquest by Alexander the Great, and they and their descendants formed a colonial ruling class there for about a thousand years, down to the Arab conquest in A.D. 642. At first they were a kingdom of their own; then, with the defeat of Cleopatra and Mark Antony, a province of the Roman (which then became the Byzantine) Empire. During that millennium the hellenized citizens of Greco-Egyptian towns regarded a Greek education as part of their Greek identity. So they did all round the Mediterranean; what is different about Egypt is the climate, dry enough to preserve papyrus. So, for example, when excavators in the 1890s dug the site of Oxyrhynchus, 'City of the Sharp-nosed Fish', they discovered its ancient rubbish dumps preserved, twenty feet deep, under the sand. Among the 500,000 fragments recovered there we find a substantial group which illustrate the set books read by Greek-Egyptian students,

and the study aids which they needed to survive the experience.

## Homer at school

Of course, Homer was the first of poets, the Bible and Shakespeare rolled into one: and therefore he was central to the curriculum. 'Homer is a god, not a man': those learning to write used this as a practice sentence. 'I asked your teacher what you were reading', writes a mother to her son, 'and he said "book 6"' – book 6 of the *Iliad*, that is, it went without saying. Yet, as set books go, Homer could hardly have been more unsuitable.

Even in the fifth century B.C. the well-brought-up schoolboy, as depicted by Aristophanes, had to learn the meaning of the Homeric phrase ἀμεινὰ κάθηνα, because it was so obscure. By the time of the Roman Empire, spoken Greek had already parted company, in grammar and pronunciation, from classical Greek; and the even more archaic Greek of Homer was as far from the normal student as Chaucer is from us. So, like us, the Egyptian Greeks needed a classical education to read classical texts; and they too found it a major commitment.

For your Homer class in the second century A.D., you would of course need a text. Texts came in all shapes and sizes, from *de luxe* copies with large letters and wide margins to cheap editions written out small and scruffy on the blank back of some used papyrus. They all had a shape in common – they were book-rolls, not codex-books of the modern kind. They all had the same format, something that strikes us as doubling the difficulty: the text is written continuously – without word divisions. This is the norm in all Greek books up to the tenth century A.D.; the only help you have is a few scattered stops and accents. Of course, you get used to it: as your eye moves along the letters, your mind matches the signs against its

lexicon, tests various combinations, and picks out an intelligible sequence of words. But the more alien the diction, the more difficult the analysis. Homer's special dialect and exotic vocabulary would not normally figure in the mental vocabulary of a second-century school-child.

## Teach yourself Homer

As a first step, you must divide the words. The picture at the top of p. 6 shows a wooden tablet in the British Library (tablets often served as exercise-books, since they could be erased and reused), where a rather elegant hand (the school-teacher's?) has copied out eight lines of Homer, and marked the end of each word with a / above the line. But even when you have the words, it is a question of what they mean. One exercise would require you to translate the Homeric lines into 'modern' (that is Roman-era) Greek. Such paraphrases also circulated as cribs. A wooden notebook in the Ashmolean Museum includes a paraphrase of the beginning of the *Iliad*, alongside declensions and conjugations. Better still – the closest thing we have to an ancient text with Greek on one page and translation facing it – is a papyrus Homer now in Florence, in which each line of the poem is followed by a translation in normal Greek. But this is the slacker's way.

Serious students work it out for themselves, with the help of their dictionaries. Dictionaries come in two shapes: the more useful, vocabularies set out line by line and book by book, with the Homeric word in one column and the translation in another (left); the more scholarly, alphabetic lexica to the whole of Homer. One student sent out an SOS on a piece of broken pot (papyrus cost money, whereas potsherds could be had from any dustbin): 'My lord Isidoros, when you come bring me the Vocabulary to *Iliad* 1, as I asked you' (right).

Some of this material may recur in yet larger books not recommended for the beginner: the major Commentaries. These discuss not just meaning, but rhetoric, mythology, characterization, social institutions, and problems of textual criticism.

They tend therefore to go on and on, and some copies correspondingly show an off-putting combination of long lines, small script, and frequent abbreviations. A substantial commentary on *Iliad* 2 alone, in use at Oxyrhynchus, originally occupied a roll 15 feet [4.5 m] long.

### Bluffers' Guides to Homer

So much for the detail. An educated person should in any case know the plot. You could buy a kind of *Bluffer's Guide*, which summarized the books of each poem one by one: so in the picture at the bottom of this page we have the heading *Iliad* I, then the first line, then the beginning of the summary. That would not contain all the facts, and at school at least you might face a serious quiz. 'Who was the general of the Trojans? – Hector' is easy. But then 'Who were his advisors? – Polydamas and Antenor. Who were his heralds? – Idaeus and Eumedes the father of Dolon, and perhaps Dolon as well. Who were the seers? – Helenus and Cassandra the children of Priam'. Then follows a short narrative of the events leading up to the Trojan war, a kind of 'the story so far'; then, as before, the first line of *Iliad* 1 and the summary of the book. All this copied out by someone really cack-handed (see above): let's hope he could read Homer more easily than he could write.

### No Greek without Homer

Homer represented Hellenism, as the government would like Shakespeare to represent Britishness. Who read how much of him after school, we don't know. The rubbish dumps of Oxyrhynchus yield at least a thousand copies of one or more books of one or other poem (most often *Iliad* I, which perhaps suggests that many people got no further). Is that a sign how regularly people read him? Or how regularly they threw him away? It's easy enough to visualize granny giving you a nice set of the *Iliad* for your sixteenth birthday, which quite soon after might make its way to the tip. But Homer remained potent as a cultural symbol, and as a prophetic force.

The orator Dio of Prusa, who had condescended to visit the Greek colony of Olbia, far into the Black Sea near the mouth of the Dnieper, at the end of the first century A.D., commented patronizingly that its citizens no longer talked pure Greek, because they were surrounded by barbarians, yet almost all of them knew the *Iliad* by heart. And even those who had not read a word of the bard since their school-days (if any) could still use the Homer Oracle (see right): 216 individual lines of Homer, chosen a little at random, and each one numbered with three numbers, from 111 up to 666. The user

rolls three dice, and that gives three numbers between 1 and 6. You then look up the line with those three numbers. 132 will get you 'Hold back, and do not wish alone to quarrel with kings' – an encouragement to caution; whereas it's good to start the day with 112 'So courage, Diomedes! and fight against the Trojans'.

Homer, then, was variously embedded in life as well as in school: both helped him to survive that long darkness after the fall of Rome, when so many Greek texts disappeared for ever. Only the set books, and a few accidents, transferred from papyrus rolls to the tougher and handier parchment codex, sat out the Middle Ages in the few surviving libraries. Printing at last promised more immortality with less effort; and so we still have the printed Homer easily to hand – and from the printed text the digitized text available on line from the TLG (see p. 10). That saga of survival has depended on a hundred or so generations of students, who have lived Homer, dictionary in hand. We today face the same basic difficulties as our predecessors of the second century A.D. – if that's any consolation.

*Peter Parsons' book on Oxyrhynchus, City of the Sharp-nosed Fish, has just been winning all the prizes, including the Criticos Prize. Get your granny to buy it for you for your birthday, along with the Iliad.*